

VZCZCXRO9415
OO RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHIHL RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHFR #3534/01 2361500
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 241500Z AUG 07
FM AMEMBASSY PARIS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9685
INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES PRIORITY
RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 003534

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/24/2017
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [FR](#) [IZ](#) [US](#)
SUBJECT: FRENCH MFA "REFLECTING" ON IMPLICATIONS OF
KOUCHNER'S VISIT TO IRAQ

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4. (b), (d).

11. (C) Summary: French FM Kouchner's visit to Iraq allowed France to re-engage meaningfully with a wide range of Iraqi political and confessional/ethnic leaders and left Kouchner "moved" by the extent of destruction in that country. The French MFA told us August 24 that Kouchner and his staff are still "reflecting" over the visit as they decide how to follow up. Kouchner's interlocutors received his message of solidarity and desire to help with appreciation. Kouchner also took pains to dissociate his visit from the USG and denied any link to the meeting in Maine between Presidents Bush and Sarkozy. The MFA denies Kouchner formally offered to organize a dialogue among Iraqis and believes the press has exaggerated the importance of some public musing on Kouchner's part. France will reach out to the EU in support of a new multilateral initiative. The MFA expects to be in touch with the USG as well, although it may wait to see how things play out in Washington in response to the Petraeus report. The contours of French thinking should be clearer by the time of the UNGA, which will be no coincidence given Kouchner's desire to place the UN at the head of a multinational effort for Iraqi reconstruction. One concrete result of the visit was Kouchner's decision to proceed with stalled plans to establish a French "embassy office" in Irbil; for budget and other administrative reasons, however, it is unclear when it will be set up. End summary

12. (C) French MFA Iraq desk officer Olivier Masseret provided a readout August 24 of FM Kouchner's visit to Iraq August 19-21. His main points, a number of which have been made in the press, included:

--The visit was entirely at Kouchner's initiative and was in no way tied to the meeting in Maine between Presidents Bush and Sarkozy. Masseret recalled Kouchner's longstanding ties to Kurdish leader and current former President of Iraq Jalal Talabani, who had been pressing Kouchner to visit since Kouchner became foreign minister.

--Making it clear that the visit in no way occurred at the request of the U.S. or in furtherance of U.S. policies was something Kouchner stressed with each of his interlocutors. Masseret complained that it has been hard to shake the press from the false but understandable impression that Presidents Bush and Sarkozy had discussed or approved the visit when they met in Maine. Kouchner also carried with him a copy of an editorial he wrote before the March 2003 invasion entitled "Neither Saddam nor War" to correct the misimpression that Kouchner had supported U.S. military force to remove Saddam Hussein.

--Kouchner's jam-packed schedule included meetings with nearly every political leader and just about every confessional grouping. Masseret indicated that Kouchner knew he had some work to do rebuilding France's image. This included dispelling the notion that France still harbors some

nostalgia for the days when Iraq's Sunnis dominated the political scene. Masseret sought to correct the misimpression that Kouchner only had contacts among Kurds to say that this visit revealed to many for the first time that he was well known in all the major ethnic and confessional groups.

--Iraqi leaders responded well to Kouchner's core message of solidarity with the Iraqi people's suffering, readiness to listen and help, and commitment to turning the page in the Iraqi/French relationship. There was some grouching about France's policy under President Chirac, but even that seemed pro forma. If anything, according to Masseret, the angriest sentiment Iraqis expressed was that France had waited so long after Saddam Hussein's fall to re-engage meaningfully.

--If anything impressed Kouchner, it was the absolute devastation that marked Iraq in all spheres, especially the economic and social. This fueled Kouchner's view, as expressed publicly, that Iraq's ongoing crisis was not merely a national tragedy but a catastrophe whose already dramatic regional implications are only increasing. Masseret said it may seem simplistic, but the visit was an eye-opening and moving experience for Kouchner. In particular, the plight of Iraq's Christians touched Kouchner because of the escalating persecution they seem to face. (Comment: This was a point Kouchner made in an interview on one of the nightly national newscasts. End comment)

13. (C) Kouchner and his staff are now reflecting on the visit and trying to figure out what to make France's focus and how best to rally European and other international support. Masseret dismissed press speculation about a

PARIS 00003534 002 OF 002

possible French-hosted gathering of Iraqi leaders along the lines of the intra-Lebanese dialogue Kouchner initiated. He explained that Kouchner did muse to reporters that France would be open to creating a safe space for competing factions to meet, but it was no more concrete than that. He denied that Kouchner made the offer in his various meetings and agreed that President Talabani's rejection of such an initiative effectively took it off the table at least for now. The bottom line for Kouchner, Masseret continued, was that anything France does add real value and not appear to another case of France off on its own pursuing objectives that had no other buy-in.

14. (C) Masseret spoke of the UN angle, which is symbolically and ideologically important to Kouchner. As reported in the media, Masseret spoke of Kouchner's insistence on arriving in Baghdad exactly four years after the bombing of the UN compound that killed his friend Sergio de Mello and many former colleagues from Kouchner's days directing UN efforts in Kosovo. Kouchner further insisted that his first official act in Baghdad be the laying of a wreath at the site of the bombing to honor the fallen. It was not clear to Masseret how the UN will fit into Kouchner's thinking, but press reports were right to highlight the key role he will want it to play in any concerted multilateral effort.

15. (C) How Europe will fit into French ideas for the way forward in Iraq is a central aspect of evolving French thinking. Masseret would not comment on press reports of tepid responses by many of Kouchner's EU colleagues in response to his encouragement that they follow his lead. Europe, however, will be key should France seek to mobilize a more robust UN presence and effort in Iraq. Although there are no plans just yet, France will seek an appropriate EU ministerial to discuss increased and concerted support for Iraq. Masseret said that Kouchner will need to convince his colleagues that this is not just another instance of France going off on its own but something that has implications for EU interests in the Middle East.

16. (C) Working with the U.S. is another subject under

discussion. Masseret said that Kouchner wants to consult with the Secretary, as he did August 24, on a regular basis but preserve France's independence. This includes its ability to speak its mind when and as it deems necessary. Agreeing that the visit arguably transformed the Iraq issue from being a subject of disagreement to one about which we could have a useful dialogue, the MFA will probably not have recommendations on what to say to the U.S. until the current "reflection" period ends. While not saying how long that might last, he surmised that France will be ready to talk to us and others about Iraq on the margins of the UNGA in late September. Noting the release of the Petraeus report in mid-September, Masseret expected it would inform French thinking not merely for its content but also for its impact on U.S. policy afterward.

17. (C) One area of U.S./French cooperation Masseret praised effusively was the outstanding help provided for Kouchner's visit by Baghdad Deputy Polcouns Rob Waller (on a one-year TDY from his job as Paris NEA watcher). His role was vital in ensuring coordination of security and other logistical arrangements. (Comment: The acting director of the MFA's equivalent to our NEA bureau echoed this point in a separate encounter.)

18. (C) As a final note, Masseret confirmed tentative press reporting that the MFA is now committed to the idea of opening an "embassy office" in Irbil. He elaborated that it would be lightly staffed -- a sort of "French presence post" -- and not expected to handle consular duties (too few French citizens in northern Iraq, no desire to take on visa work in Irbil). When asked about the timeframe, Masseret was vague, citing budgetary and other "administrative" issues that needed to be worked out. Another problem arose after Kouchner started informing his interlocutors of the office in Irbil as Shi'a contacts pressed for a similar office in Basra for "balance." Kouchner made a vague commitment to do what he could, but Masseret stated the security situation in Basra at the moment clearly ruled that idea out of the question.

Please visit Paris' Classified Website at:
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/eur/paris/index.cfm>

PEKALA